DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 382 973 CS 214 855

AUTHOR Franklin, H. Bruce
TITLE Teaching the Vietnam War in the 1990s.
PUB DATE Apr 95
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Joint Meetings of the Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association (Philadelphia, PA, April 12-15, 1995).
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Teaching Guides (For Teacher) (052) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Course Content; Fiction; Films; Higher Education; *Literature Appreciation; Poetry; Political Issues; *Popular Culture; Undergraduate Students; United States History; *Vietnam War
IDENTIFIERS Historical Background; *Vietnam War Literature

ABSTRACT

For an instructor who has been teaching the Vietnam War for over 30 years, the War has been teaching him for even longer. One of the objectives in teaching the Vietnam War in the '990s is what it meant to teach the Vietnam War in the 1960s. It is easy to forget that the antiwar movement began as an attempt to educate the government and the nation, however naive this goal may have been. The first national activity against the war was the teach-ins of March 1965, and the election campaign of Lyndon Johnson in 1964 was itself an educational experience. Today's college students have grown up in an environment in which the Vietnam War has been redefined, rewritten, and, most important, reimaged--most recently in the film "Forrest Gump." Hollywood has explored the POW/MIA myth by producing such POW rescue fantasies as "Uncommon Valor," "Missing In Action," and "Rambo: First Blood, Part II." On the first day of class, students are asked to answer (anonymously) central questions about the War, such as when did it begin, who won, and why. Also on the first day, the class explores poetry in its relation to the War. Among the books studied in class are the collections "Vietnam and America: A Documented History" and "The Vietnam War in American Stories, Songs, and Poems." The course is framed by two fictional narratives, "The Quiet American" (Graham Greene) and "Dog Soldiers" (Robert Stone). Together they offer a before-and-after picture of America. (PA)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
H.B. Franklin
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ED 382 973

Teaching the Vietnam War in the 1990s

by H. Bruce Franklin

Looking back, I realize that I have been teaching the Vietnam War for more than thirty years. And the Vietnam War has been teaching me for even longer. How is it possible to bridge between this experience and the experience of today's students, most of whom were born after the war was over--at least officially.

One of the first things I try to teach about the Vietnam War in the 1990s is what it meant to teach the Vietnam War in the 1960s. We tend to forget that the antiwar movement began as an attempt to **educate** the government and the nation. Most of us opposed to the war in the early days naively believed--and this is embarrassing to confess--that the government had somehow blundered into the war, maybe because our leaders were simply ignorant about Vietnamese history. Perhaps they didn't remember the events of 1940 to 1954. Maybe they hadn't read the Geneva Accords. So if we had teach-ins and wrote letters to editors and Congress and the President, the Government would say, "Gosh! We didn't realize that Vietnam was a single nation. Did the Geneva Accords really say that? And we had told Ho Chi Minh we'd probably support his claims for Vietnamese independence? Golly gee, I guess we had better put a stop to this foolish war."

The first national activity against the war were those teach-ins of March 1965. Unless you count as the first national antiwar action voting for the 1964 presidential candidate who promised never to send American boys to Asia to do the job that Asian boys should do. That, too, was an educational experience, especially when we learned that while repeating this promise over and over

CS 214 555

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

again, President Lyndon Johnson was covertly planning and already beginning a full-scale U.S. war in Indochina, all under the cover of plausible deniability. No wonder that teaching the Vietnam War was perceived right away as a subversive, unpatriotic activity.

Experience was the great teacher for those who were trying to teach, a lesson lost in the miasma of so-called theory that has paralyzed activism in the 1990s. Teaching the Vietnam War during the 1960s and early 1970s meant giving speeches at teach-ins and rallies, getting on talk shows, writing pamphlets, articles, and books, painting banners, picket signs, and graffiti, circulating petitions and leaflets, coining slogans, marching, sitting-in, demonstrating at army bases, lobbying Congress, testifying before war crimes hearings and Congressional investigations, researching corporate and university complicity, harboring deserters, organizing strikes, heckling generals and politicians, blocking induction centers and napalm plants, and even, in a few cases, immolating oneself. All of these were forms of teaching.

It's hard to convey the emotions that inspired these actions. Probably the most widely shared was outrage, a feeling that some consider outdated in the 1990s. Recently I've had students in my class treat me as though I were a naive kid. They say things like: "Why were you so outraged? What did you expect? We've known the government did stuff like this all our lives."

Students today grew up in an environment in which the Vietnam War has been redefined, rewritten, and, most important, reimaged. While relatively few accept Ronald Reagan's definition of the war as a "noble cause," many believe that we could have won the war if

it were not for politicians, hippies, students, reporters, and Jane Fonda. And almost all have been influenced by the POW/MIA myth. As I explain on the first day of class, the consciousness that they bring to the course will be a major subject of the course. Thus they begin with a valuable expertise, for who else knows more about what they believe about the war or the sources of this belief?

I also explain that the history of the course itself, as well as what happens to them as it goes along, is part of our subject. The course began in 1981, shortly after such Hollywood products as The Deer Hunter and newly-elected President Reagan began to turn everything that we had learned about the war into its opposite. The Deer Hunter's central image reverses the famous picture of General Nguyen Ngoc Loan, head of Saigon's security police, executing a prisoner by shooting him in the temple with a revolver. To get some sense of how deep this reverse image has penetrated, I sometimes project the original image. Then I ask, "How many of you are familiar with this image?" Almost all raise their hands. Then I ask what it is. About 80% respond that it's a picture of a Viet Cong officer executing a civilian.

Soon Hollywood would go beyond The Deer Hunter's POW images into full-scale inculcation of the POW/MIA myth in POW rescue fantasies of American superheroes exterminating legions of evil Vietnamese: Gene Hackman in Uncommon Valor (1983), Chuck Norris in Missing in Action (1984), and of course Sylvester Stallone in Rambo: First Blood, Part II (1985). One part of this celluloid POW myth of course is the vision of the Vietnamese "enemy" as unfathomably cruel Oriental Communists, who for no rational reason

have been torturing our heroic POWs for decades. As some students now say, "We grew up learning to hate the Vietnamese." But there has been a shift since The Deer Hunter won the Academy Award for the Best Picture of 1978. There has been a growing tendency simply to erase the Vietnamese entirely from vision. So the Academy Award for the Best Picture of 1994 went to Forrest Gump, which projects Vietnam as merely a shadowy jungle that shoots at American soldiers.

On the first day of class in 1981, I had the students write anonymous answers to four questions: "When did the Vietnam War begin? Who were the opposing sides?" Who won? Why?" These were then, and have continued to be, key questions that we explore throughout the rest of the course. In recent years I have added a fifth question: "When did the Vietnam War end?"

None of these questions, of course, has a simple answer. All are hotly contested. All pose fundamental problematics.

For example, when did the Vietnam War begin? In 1965, when Lyndon Johnson landed the Marines? In 1962, when the number of U.S. military "advisers" reached 16,000? In 1954, when the United States set up a puppet government in Saigon and U.S. commando teams attacked Hanoi? In 1946, when a French invasion force, equipped by the United States, arrived in Haiphong aboard U.S. ships? Or did the Vietnam war for national independence begin in the tenth century as resistance against Chinese occupation, transform in 1887 into an anti-colonial struggle against the French that lasted through 1940, become an armed movement against Japanese occupation during World War II, and continue against the postwar French

reinvasion and the U.S. forces that replaced the French?

Studying the Vietnam War shows how the shape of a narrative determines, and is determined by, its content. One cannot date the "beginning" of the Vietnam War without deciding whether it was an anti-colonial war for national independence--and hence also one in a series of imperialist wars waged by France, Japan, and the United States--or whether it was an invasion by "North Vietnam" of "South Vietnam," which was then supported by its ally the United States.

Exploring these questions teaches not only about the central issues raised by the war but also about what is involved in constructing the narratives--that is, stories--we call history. And this in turn bridges to other forms of narrative studied in the course, especially autobiography and fiction.

Also on the first day I introduce another major component of the course: poetry and its relations to the Vietnam War.

Poetry is a universal human activity. All societies--including preliterate tribes, agricultural colonies, industrial nation states, and financial empires--continually create poems. In all societies the majority of people crave poetry, cherish it, and engage with it daily. If these statements do not seem to apply to modern America, that is only because most Americans have come to accept a false dichotomy, inculcated throughout the educational system, between "poetry," which is presented as the property of a cultural elite, and the songs and other poems they enjoy, which are implicitly defined as cultural rubbish beneath notice. So when asked "Do you like poetry," most American students will say no--and then after class turn on the radio or stereo to listen to

poetry being sung, as most poetry usually has been.

But the Vietnam War has helped to erode the barriers between "poetry" as literature of the elite and poetry as relished by the masses. One force undermining these barriers is that wonderful poetry written by its veterans, which we are getting to sample at this conference, and which is an essential component of the course. The other force is popular music.

The history of American popular music from the mid 1960s on is intertwined with the Vietnam War. Record sales tripled during the 1960s. Songs were a prominent feature of the antiwar movement and a shaping element of its associated counterculture, an inspiration for prowar sentiment, and an essential part of GI culture in Vietnam. The war exerted deep and lasting influences on the form and content of popular music.

The introduction to these themes on the first day is Bruce Springsteen's "Born in the U.S.A," that 1984 song invoked by both Ronald Reagan and his Democratic opponent Walter Mondale in their presidential campaigns that year. Most of the students indicate they are familiar with the song. Many are then shocked to discover that the song is about the Vietnam War, that it is not a flag-waving celebration of America, and that it bitterly protests against those who sent poor and working youth "off to a foreign land to go and kill the yellow man."

As soon as the course began in the midst of the revisionism of the early 1980s, I felt the need for a documentary history that would restore much of what we had learned. So I turned to Marvin Gettleman, editor of the first such book, his 1965 Vietnam:

History, Documents, and Opinions, which went on to become what is still the bestselling history of the war. Faced with mountains of new material, Gettleman and I recruited historians Jane Franklin and Marilyn Young to edit a new documentary history for the 1980s. The result was Vietnam and America: A Documented History, a collection of primary and secondary documents designed to help students directly confront the crucial evidence and central debates. We have just finished a major rewrite of Vietnam and America, designed for the 1990s, which will be out in August 1995.

Trying to break down the notion that history is abstract or just about famous men, I interweave with the historical documents autobiographical narratives by combatants from both sides of the war. These include Ron Kovic's Born on the Fourth of July, W. D. Ehrhart's Passing Time--which has an astonishing effect on my students--and memoirs by David Marr and Mrs. Nguyen Thi Dinh in Vietnam and America. These autobiographies display the contradictory forces that shaped the fighters on opposite sides. For example, Kovic and Ehrhart show how central in their own lives was the image of the ultramale hero, incarnate in the cultural role of John Wayne and crucial to their U.S. Marine training designed to strip them of everything "feminine" so that they could become efficient, obedient killers. In stark contrast, Nguyen Thi Dinh's experience of oppression as a Vietnamese woman led to her becoming the Deputy Commander of the National Liberation Front Armed Forces. Similarly, while Kovic tells how Marine recruits were indoctrinated with the concept that civilians are nothing but "maggots" and "scum," Nguyen Thi Dinh shows how the other side's strategy

depended on an armed populace fighting a "People's War."

There is now no shortage of historical texts, biographical narrative, and novels. But there are still two large gaps: short stories and popular songs. So I've just completed a collection called The Vietnam War in American Stories, Songs, and Poems, which will also be out in August 1995 in an inexpensive paperback. And Wayne Karlin now has in press a fine collection of stories by American and Vietnamese authors, due out in the fall of 1995.

The course is framed by two fictional narratives that offer a before-and-after picture of America: Graham Greene's The Quiet American (1955) and Robert Stone's Dog Soldiers (1974). Set in 1953, Greene's classic introduces a fateful figure who emerges amid the ruins of European colonialism, the archetypal innocent, idealistic, anti-communist American liberal, literally walking in the blood he is spilling with the very best intentions. We compare this fictional portrait with the self portrait Edward Lansdale paints in his top-secret report reprinted in Vietnam and America. when I ask students whether Lansdale reminds them of anyone, several usually shout out: "Oliver North." Stone's aptly named John Converse appears like a final avatar of Greene's quiet American, no longer the idealist bringing American democracy to Vietnam but now a self-loathing cynic smuggling Vietnamese heroin to America. As Converse says to his equally self-deceived macho buddy Hicks in Vietnam, "We didn't know who we were till we got here. We thought we were something else."